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ABSTRACT

Psychologists and sociologists recognize the importance of graffiti, yet there is a lack of information on the content of high school desk top graffiti. To study desk top graffiti, a 9th and 10th grade English classroom located in an inner city high school in the southeastern United States was found in which graffiti was written on nearly 90% of the desks. A total of 375 clearly discernible graffiti was copied on cards with chained responses being treated as a single unit. The graffiti were classified into content categories established a posteriori: (1) proper names and nicknames; (2) subject-related scriptures; (3) romantic; (4) general remarks; (5) drawings; and (6) mathematical operations. Data were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentages. The results revealed that graffiti content reflected three main concerns of the students: the establishment of a self-identity, class work, and love relationships. These findings suggest a need for the school to deal with adolescent problems. Content differences were found between desk top classroom graffiti and high school restroom graffiti. The structured environment of the classroom may have imposed social restraint on the students' written expressions. (Author/NB)

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Desk Top Graffiti in an English High School Classroom

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Abstract

This study classified desk top graffiti found in an English classroom (grades 9 and 10) of an innercity Southeastern high school. Since no prior study was found to address this topic, the following content categories were established a posteriori: (1) proper names and nicknames; (2) subject related scriptures; (3) romantic; (4) general remarks; (5) drawings; and (6) mathematical operations. Data were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentages. Graffiti content reflected three main concerns of the students; the establishment of a self-identity, class work, and love relationships. The findings suggested a need for the school to deal with adolescent problems. Content differences were found between desk top classroom graffiti and high school restroom graffiti. A structured environment, such as the classroom, was deemed to impose social restraint on students' written expresions.

Desk Top Graffiti in an English High School Classroom

"This desk is dedicated to those who died waiting for the bell to ring.
(Traditional desk graffito found in countless schools.)"
(Reisner and Wechsler, 1974, p. 83)

People have different attitudes toward graffiti. Some consider it a nuisance. They view inscriptions of figures, designs or words on walls, rocks, sidewalks, desks, or the like, as the work of vandals. Administrative officials of public buildings and universities strive to prevent and continually eliminate such inscriptions. Simms (1981), a national sales manager for Anti-Graffiti Systems, Inc. (at the time), explained the most efficient and cost-effective ways in which schools and universities could prevent and clean graffiti from walls. Bonuso (1976) recognized that graffitists deface and destroy millions of dollars of public property each year.

In spite of this loss, graffiti can be considered an ancient custom. Prehistoric man left proof of his existence on cave walls. Pompeii (79 A.D.) is a classical example of a city with graffiti written on its walls. Inscriptions have been found in a marketplace in ancient

Athens and in Roman public latrines. Abel and Buckley (1977) explained that Roman authorities took measures to curb such practices.

Though graffiti may have been considered a public nuisance in the past, at present it constitutes a valuable source of information about the everyday tribulations of common people in ancient times. Thus, graffiti can be regarded as another way of studying some cultural aspects of past and present civilizations.

Modern psychologists and sociologists recognize the importance of graffiti. Deiulio (1973) pointed out that graffiti was gaining more recognition as a legitimate means of communication than ever before. Reisner and Wechsler (1974), in their Encyclopedia of Graffiti, stated that:

> For sociologists graffiti represent first-hand evidence of social change and unrest. For psychologists and psychiatrists the messages that include wish-fulfillment, fantasy, loneliness, may provide insights useful in diagnosis. (p. vii)

Even politicians pay attention to the content of graffiti.

Since many professionals are paying close attention to graffiti messages, it is only natural to ask ourselves whether graffiti has any value to educators. It is a fact that most schools strive to prevent the occurrence

of such inscriptions. Some teachers have strict norms against writing on desks. This is one of the reasons why most studies have relied on school lavatories as a source of data. The private atmosphere of restrooms permit students to express their inner thoughts and feelings without the usual social restraints.

A review of the literature on educationally related graffiti in ERIC files, Dissertation Abstracts International, and Book Review (as far back as 1970), reveals two basic approaches to the study of this subject. One approach refers to establishing differences and similarities of graffiti content according to sex or country of origin. The second approach uses differentially selected graffiti to prove a certain point the author has in mind.

Olowu (1983) studied and compared samples of graffiti found in lavatories of two British and two Nigerian universities. He found differences in content and frequency of graffiti related to homosexuality, humor, politics, and superstition among the two societies.

In 1953, Kinsey et al., reported in their book Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, that men wrote a greater amount of graffiti than women. The authors hypothesized that this was a result of the inherent basic differences in male and female sexuality. The

findings of more recent studies have challenged this view. The new theory is that graffiti reflect social conventions, and as such, patterns are likely to change as society's view of female sexuality changes.

The studies reviewed by the writer confirm changes in the proportion of graffiti written by men in comparison to women. Wales and Brewer (1976) conducted a study in lavatories of four American high schools. Females outwrote males 3 1/2 to 1. A similar finding, but this time closer to 4 to 1, was reported by Ahmed (1981) in his study of restroom graffiti in Canadian high schools. Both studies indicated that female students wrote more sex-romantic graffiti than males, and male students wrote more sex-erotic graffiti than females. These studies surveyed a limited (not more than four) number of high schools and in a limited territory (same city).

At the university level, some studies showed contradictory findings on sex related graffiti of different American universities. This seemed to be the case in the study reported by Greenberg (1979) and the one performed by Loewenstine, Ponticos, and Paludi (1982). Thus, we see that the vast majority of studies on educationally related graffiti cannot be readily

generalized to the student population.

Articles, like the ones written by Lewis (1978) and Bonuso (1976), use examples of desk top graffiti to describe university or school situations. Bonuso's article is specially applicable to high schools. The author's theory is that: "The depersonalization of society that subordinates identity to numbers and personality to social utility also results in political and social graffiti." (p. 91). Bonuso suggested that graffiti was generated as a reaction to social situations. Three cases were presented to support his point of view. The first one concerned a teacher that did not recall some students names. As a consequence some students wrote their names on their desks several times. The second one concerned a teacher that felt that he or she was always right and did not accept student opinion. As a result, students made drawings of the "king teacher" or wrote expressions of boredom. The third case involved a school administration that did not allow criticism of their policies in the school newspaper. As a reaction, graffiti content related to "student power" started to appear on building's walls. The author ended the article with the following paragraph:

> Graffiti like these responses to school situations will probably cease to appear as the situation is improved. When students can communicate honestly and directly with adults in the schools, they will be less likely to run behind a bathroom door to express their views. When their minds are engaged in class, their hands will not be chronicling resentment. (p. 91).

The only study the writer found that directly addressed the topic of desk top graffiti was conducted by Deiulio (1973) at a teacher education college. The researcher considered graffiti as another source of information that could be used to evaluate teacher education programs. He was primarily interested in students' thoughts and feelings while functioning in their professional education classes as recorded on their desks.

Deiulio found that student sentiment about curricular or instructional activity in professional education courses was negative. "Predominant emotions were boredom, confusion, anxiety, hostility, fear of failure, and lack of purpose." (p. 103). From his findings, he developed four hypotheses for evolving a more human-oriented curricular structure for teacher education programs. He emphasized the importance of desk top graffiti as a valuable evaluative source of teacher programs that was commonly unexplored.

The review of the literature clearly shows a lack of information on the content of high school desk top graffiti. No study was found to address this topic.

The purpose of this study was to find a high school classroom where graffiti proliferated so that new information could be recorded on the subject. What is the content of high school student written desk top graffiti under a structured environment? In what ways does it differ from graffiti found in high school lavatories? Are there graffiti messages that signal a need for the school to deal with some of the realities of teenagers' lives?

Methodology

The study was conducted in an innercity Southeastern high school (grades 9 through 12). The student body was approximately 1200. Nearly 50% of the students were male and 50% female. The ethnic composition was 20% whites and 80% blacks. The school served low and middle income families. A written policy against defacing school property was in effect and the vast majority of the classrooms visited had either new desks or clean ones.

An English classroom (grades 9 and 10) was found

to have graffiti written on close to 90% of the desks. The data were collected by copying all the graffiti of each desk on a 3 x 5 card. Only clearly discernible graffiti were recorded. Chained responses were treated as a single unit.

Content categories were established on an a posteriori basis, since no prior categories had been established for high school desk top graffiti. Six general content categories were derived as follows:

1. Proper names or nicknames.

2. Subject related scriptures - spelling words, phrases, and definitions.

3. Romantic - any statement of attachment excluding sexual.

4. Drawings - faces, hearts, bodies, three dimensional shapes, nazi signs, insects, birds, sex related sketches, etc.

5. Mathematical operations - numbers, addition, multiplications, divisions and operations with fractions.

6. General Remarks - sex related, feelings about the world, messages to other students, teacher's name, self-image, insults, names of commercial brands, rock groups, school organizations, and others.

Each graffito was exclusively assigned to one of these

six general categories.

Analysis

Data were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentages. A total of 375 graffiti were recorded. Only three of the 34 desks in the classroom were completely free from graffiti. Most graffiti were written with pencils, pens, or magic markers. Some desks had graffiti written with "white out" paint.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentages of the general content categories. The highest frequency of desk top graffiti, which accounted for 34.9% of the total, was related to inscriptions of names or nicknames. Adolescents are searching for a personal identity. They want to establish themselves as unique human beings. Therefore, they constantly write their names everywhere, including desk tops. By doing this, they are leaving proof of their existence and personal worth. Some names were accompanied by general remarks such as "the one and only" or "someone special".

Insert Table 1 about here

The study conducted by Wales and Brewer (1976) reported 26% of the total graffiti being attributed to names and miscellaneous comments. It is reasonable for most students to be more comfortable with writing their names on classroom desks than in restrooms. One cannot be totally sure that the names written on restroom's walls were the actual names of the perpetrators.

Subject-matter content occupied the second highest frequency (18.9%). This category was not present in prior studies. Most of the graffiti was related to spelling. An intent of copying cannot be ruled out, but a recognition of prior misspelled words could have prompted students to write the correct spelling as practice. The intrinsic value of some words or phrases may have motivated students to write them on their desks.

Romantic notes occupied the third place (14.7%) and, if considered in general (adding drawings and remarks), it tied in second place with subject-matter content. Some clearly showed who loved whom. Others left a question mark or blank spaces to write the name of the loved one. Still others presented crossed out names, indicating the end of a romantic relationship.

Wales and Brewer reported a higher frequency (51%)

of romantic related graffiti in high school lavatories. Erotic remarks appeared on restroom walls, but were not present in desk top graffiti. A structured environment, such as the classroom, may have accounted for this difference.

The fourth priority (13.3%) was General Remarks. Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages for the subcategories of the General Remarks category. Sex related graffiti accounted for only 2.1% of the total recorded (375). This category occupied 14% of the total reported in the Wales and Brewer study. Once again, a structured environment seems to impose social restraint on students.

Insert Table 2 about here

Messages were generally meant to greet a certain student. Interest in name brands, rock groups, and school organizations were present. References to homosexuality were absent. Insults occupied only 1.1% of the grand total. One message stated: "The world is not fair sometimes. That's life." Another stated: "I hate the world". This message appeared on a desk where nazi emblems had been drawn. The teacher's name appeared only on two occassions of the 375 recordings.

Only two mentions of drugs were recorded; one of alcohol and the other was not specified. Class spirit, as evidenced by phrases like "Class 87. The place to be.", were present.

The fifth highest content category was drawings (12.8%). Hearts and faces occurred most often. Only two of the 48 drawings exposed genital parts. One desk had five nazi emblems. Two stereo components were drawn. The rest were three dimensional figures, insects, birds, bodies, cars, or aimless sketches.

The sixth higher frequency was mathematical operations (5.3%), which included addition, multiplication, division, and operations with fractions. A possible explanation for this occurrence could be that the students were working mathematics exercises during class time.

Educational Implications

English students in the ninth and tenth grades of this Southeastern high school were concerned with establishing a self-identity. Subject-matter and love concerns seemed equally important. Thus the three main concerns of high school students seemed to be the establishment of a self-identity, class work, and love relationships. Further studies are needed to corroborate or refute these findings.

The findings suggest a need for the school to deal with adolescent problems. Seminars and conferences could be scheduled to help students deal with their feelings in a mature way. The meaning of love as opposed to sexual attraction could be clarified. Adolescents need guidance in these matters.

A second finding addresses the differences found in restroom versus classroom graffiti. A definite change in content and frequency was found under a structured environment. Both messages are important and they should be acknowledged by the schools, so that appropriate programs can be implemented to help students deal with their everyday feelings and tribulations.

Desk top graffiti, as a research topic, has been relatively unexplored because of its low incidence in American high schools. In spite of this, some schools or individual classrooms exhibit a high frequency of student written desk top graffiti. It is in these locations that further research could contribute to answering questions such as (1) What is the content of elementary desk top classroom graffiti?, (2) How does the frequency of desk top graffiti vary with different classroom desk arrangements?, (3) Is there a difference in desk top graffiti content among different

subject-matter classrooms at the high school level?, and (4) Does effective teaching reduce the frequency of desk top graffiti?

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

Desk Top High School Graffiti Content

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Proper names or nicknames	131	34.9
Subject-related scriptures	71	18.9
Romantic	55	14.7
General Remarks	50	13.3
Drawings	48	12.8
Mathematical operations	20	5.3
Total	375	99.9

TABLE 2

General Remarks Subcategories of Desk Top

High School Graffiti

Subcategories	Frequency	Percentage (out of 375)
Messages	10	2.7
Sex	8	2.1
Name brands, rock groups, or school organizations	8	2.1
Insults	4	1.1
Class spirit	4	1.1
Feelings about the world	3	0.8
Self-image	3	0.8
Teacher's name	2	0.5
Others	8	2.1
Total	50	13.3